

Against the Grain

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Features

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Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way from page 84

der, and fewer opportunities for future leaders to develop the necessary skills. But these are times of profound change in libraries, and a strong dose of thirty-something energy, ideas, and even naiveté may be more important than all that experience. Boomers need to remember that **JFK** was 43 when he became President; **Bill Clinton** 46. We didn't have a problem with that! And who among us has felt completely "ready" for every promotion or new challenge they've faced? The fear that accompanies being over one's head is a powerful motivator.

At the **TAIGA 2 Forum** in Seattle, a group of 20 **AUL**'s discussed succession planning, and a few comments and questions from that session are illuminating:

- Is our succession planning too focused on old management models?
- Our generation has made administration look tedious, focused on pushing paper and politics.
- Succession planning is needed at all levels, from supervisor to director.
- Do library managers always need to be librarians?
- There's an enormous need for technical skills, and GenX/NetGen staff integrate those naturally.

- Project and interim management opportunities abound, and can help identify talent and develop skills.
- Core competencies include team-building, communication, and innovative thinking.

- Should we be making a more conscious effort to promote younger people?

These are important questions, and now is the time to be grappling with them. It's encouraging to see programs like **ALA**'s "Emerging Leaders" and **ARL**'s "Research Library Leadership Fellows." But the very formality of these initiatives bespeaks an underlying belief that our generation's methods and values must be passed on — that somehow leaders won't "emerge" on their own, with their own methods and values. They might well do so without much help, if there were need and room enough!

We grizzled veterans have to consider that we may be part of the problem.

This year's **TAIGA 2** meeting experimented with an "unconference" approach known as Open Space. (<http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?>). While a fascinating and effective experience in itself, that's a story for another time. One of the process's few rules

is known as "The Law of Two Feet." Under that law, participants ask themselves two questions throughout the day: Am I learning? Am I contributing? If the answer to both questions is "No," the participant exercises "The

Law of Two Feet" and moves on to another session — or outside for a walk and a latte.

There's a lesson for all librarians here, but perhaps especially

for us boomers. To stay in the game, we need to apply that law to our activities every day: Are we contributing? Are we learning? If not, it's time to get up and go. 🐼

"Wake-up calls are flooding the switchboard, folks! We really are getting old."

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Features

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

"We had some options in there that literally did nothing." This confession from a **Microsoft** product manager to the *New York Times* had to be the high-water mark for candor in the entire history of the software industry. The quote was included in a January review of **Microsoft**'s new **Office 2007**, where the *Times*' reviewer reported a major "feature purge" as the most significant feature of the new package.

"**Microsoft** spent the first dozen years of **Office**'s life piling on new features," said the *Times*, thereby gaining **Microsoft** a solid reputation for "bloat and complexity." The company's aim for the new **Office** was to simplify, the review went on to say, even to shrink the system.

It's not easy, of course, for any of us to harbor a lot of sympathy for **Microsoft**. Over the years we've all encountered more wizards, task bars, toolbars, toolboxes, dialog boxes, clipboards, status bars, panes, and views than we can stand — not to mention the hateful **Office Assistant**. But, even with that, anyone who has taken part in system development must feel at least a shred of compassion for the company. Lawmaking? Sausagemaking?

That saying of ours about not really wanting to know how some things are made? Good clichés really need to be brought up to date from time to time. So let's modernize this one, to cover lawmaking, sausagemaking, and systemmaking. We know how it's done for our own users. Imagine trying to do it for the entire world, as **Microsoft** has to.

Features, like sausages and laws, don't come from nowhere, even features that literally do nothing. Somewhere in the lineage of every software feature, useful and useless ones alike, there was some kind of encounter between customer and company. A question, a complaint, a suggestion, a survey, a remark, a study, a report. Perhaps a thoughtful description of the user experience elicited from a structured focus group. Or perhaps a tantrum thrown over the phone. Maybe a more-thoughtful-than-the-usual email message. All get taken in. And some emerge eventually into daylight — like laws from legislatures, sausages from factories — though not necessarily resembling the raw materials that came in the door.

In between there's a series of steps and processes, some elegant, some gruesome, that give us the finished product. With sau-

sagemaking the part you don't want to know about, according to lore, is the ingredients. Here's where lawmaking and systemmaking part ways with sausages. With this pair, it's these steps and processes that you don't want to know about.

When it comes to laws some of this is public record, either because government makes it so or because either routine journalism or beyond-the-ordinary reporting uncovers the trail. Systemmaking, however, whether as practiced by **Microsoft**, by a publisher, by a library, or by a library vendor or utility, is mostly conducted privately, in the dark, out of sight, in places no journalist cares about. Which is why it can

continued on page 86

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seem that features come from nowhere.

Would that they did. Anyone, again, who's spent any time at all in system or software development knows that writing code is usually the easy part. Deciding what code to write, that's hard. In other words, somehow sorting through all the customer comment, as filtered, interpreted, and delivered by those within an organization with the job of communicating with customers or users; having a way to record what they bring back in a systematic way; then exposing all pertinent individuals and groups within the organization to some version of what will seem to some of them an unworkable mass of marginally useful advice that we could have thought of on our own; while tactfully not making this information too available to those who are interested but who may not fully understand that their primary job is something other than systemmaking; while finally, hardest of all, actually deciding what to do.

Or, as it is always called, "prioritization." To readers of *Against the Grain*, for whom barely an hour passes some days without their hearing the word once or twice, it will likely be a surprise that the word is considered jargon by those who track that kind of thing. "Prioritization" is made from "prior," of course, a word which comes to us through the French, English, and Latin of the Middle Ages, when it referred to monastic officials, and then later to the magistrates of the Florentine republic. It derives before that from the Latin of the Romans, who meant "superior" when they used it.

The "-ize," from Greek, is a suffix we use to turn nouns into verbs. "Within reason," says a 1965 edition of *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, "it is a useful and unexceptionable device, but it is now being employed with a freedom beyond reason." The *American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd edition, 1992, remarks that the word "is widely regarded as corporate or bureaucratic jargon," and was considered "unacceptable to the great majority of the Usage Panel." The 1996 edition of *Fowler's* notes that "prioritize" has "remained locked in the jargon of business managers, politicians, and other officials, i.e. among people who sometimes like to dress up their documents and speeches with high-sounding words." While being grouped with "officials" is some repayment, these seem cruel and unfair judgments to those of us who, beyond merely using the word, actually have to do it all the time. Even on the Web, where one would think prioritizers might find a little sympathy, one online guide to usage advises, "Pompous. Avoid this term. Instead say 'order,' 'set priorities' or 'rank.'"

It's no fun, that's for sure, prioritization. Old **Fowler** himself, if he were still around, and each one of his successors, ought to be made to take a turn at it. Then we'd see what kind of "usage" these Panels would prescribe for the rest of us. We should make that crowd figure out some other way of saying how — this time avoiding jargon — to call a meeting in order to "rank in order of importance to users or customers, combined with a ranking in

terms of cost of development to us, combined with all the personal and departmental political baggage attached to this list, and with (for a business) an estimate of what level of new sales each change will mean to the company." They might, after their very first meeting, find the word "prioritization" the embodiment of elegance.

Although it's doubtful that any **WORD** user asked **Microsoft** for a little animated character, it's easy to imagine how **Microsoft's** now-benched **Office Assistant** came into being. Remember? The smiling, omnipresent, but thankfully short-lived little paperclip riding a magic carpet of lined paper that distracted you constantly with the facial expressions, blinking eyes, turning head, hand motions, and unasked-for advice that some Team at **Microsoft** programmed in? This creature even had a name, "Clippit," and would morph, at user option, into a smiling dot, into a robot, into **Shakespeare** or **Einstein**, and into other incarnations beyond those.

The **Office Assistant**, once a standard **Office** feature, "came to be loathed by many users," according to **Wikipedia**. (Entries like this, by the way, are where **Wikipedia** whips *Britannica* hands down.) It's still around, although now, thank goodness, is buried alive beneath a blessed default of "Hide." Surely this creature was born one day at some **Microsoft** meeting where a person from Marketing, or a similar department, told product managers or business analysts or developers that users had conclusively described **Microsoft Help** as impenetrable and inaccessible. Why couldn't someone do something about it?

Then someone did, probably a person or persons who'd figured out that animation and graphics were the coming thing. So, a group went out and did their work against this finding on **Help** and by the time they were done, other

groups, taken aback as they may have been by the animated paperclip, did not have the means of killing this thing, since they had no way, likely pressured by a degree of pre-release publicity, to produce an alternative feature that would address this amply documented user need in time for the next release deadline.

There you have it, prioritization. No matter how things turned out in the end, **Microsoft** actually did quite accurately prioritize — or, more correctly in usage, establish the relative importance of — a better **Help** function in **WORD**. In the real world, though, prioritization at some point intersects, or doesn't (as with the **Office Assistant**) with the need for concrete features that satisfactorily address the needs, for a business, of both customer and company.

And that's the trick, bringing the seats in this orchestra into tune. All the cacophonous improvisation from users, field reps, public services and other library staff, developers, trainers, managers and administrators, analysts, and others with a part to play in development and what precedes it? Every one of them experts of a sort,

of course. Sometimes, somehow, there's a degree of melody and harmony in the din. A good listener can hear it. For libraries and their vendors today, there's no more important point of connection, or missed connection, than this partly covert area, systemmaking.

There's very little in the world today so irritating, for those of us who spend most of our workday sitting before a computer screen, as a feature that does nothing, or worse, does you damage. But a thoughtfully designed, beautifully executed feature, one proving that a development team has symphonized to the point of connecting with users? Few notes are as sweet, either to play, for a development team, or to hear, for a user who feels that this music was written for me. 🐼



International Dateline — European Conference Adds Weight to Debate on Scientific Publishing

by **Dr. Peter T. Shepherd** (Project Director) <pt_shepherd@hotmail.com>

The very fact of a conference on scientific publishing, sponsored by the **European Union (EU)** and held in the **Charlemagne Building** in Brussels, was the strongest of signals to publishers and researchers alike that one of the world's most influential political entities is now very interested indeed in access to, dissemination and preservation of scientific information. That publishers, researchers, as well as librarians received that signal — loud and clear — was evidenced by the attendance of more than 500 delegates, including some

of the leading lights from research, industry and government.

The Journey to Brussels

The conference, **Scientific Publishing in the European Research Area: Access, Dissemination and Preservation in the Digital Age**, held on 15-16 February 2007, was the latest in a series of initiatives from the **EU** designed to stimulate debate and evolve policy on scientific publishing in the electronic age,

continued on page 87